

Physical Activity and Exercise for Kids

Fitness is important for all kids (and adults too!). The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends regular physical activity for all children.

Chances to get physical activity and exercise in today's society are greatly reduced compared to 20 years ago. This makes it easier to be inactive and sedentary. Think of how many machines and services we use today that we used to do by hand or foot – cars, computers, telephones, restaurants, power tools, elevators, etc. Our normal daily activities do not give us enough exercise to prevent us from becoming overweight or keeping our hearts healthy. We must find physical activities for our children so they can grow, develop, and stay healthy.

Physical activity is how we move as we do our regular day to day routines. This includes walking up the stairs, walking to the store from the car, cleaning the house, etc. Exercise is the things we do for fun and to burn calories. For children, these things include roller skating, playing tag, riding a bike, etc. Most children love to move, but many lose this love of physical activity as they grow older. Research has shown that being physically active is one of the most important things your child can do to stay healthy as he grows up.

Why is this a problem?

The number of overweight infants, toddlers, and children has increased in the last 20 years. Girls are more likely to be overweight than boys. Mexican-American children are the most likely cultural group to be overweight. Children who are overweight when they are young tend to be overweight adults. The average kindergartner has watched more than 5,000 hours of TV by age 5. Children can be overweight because they don't get enough physical activity, because they eat too much, and/or because they eat the wrong kinds of food.

Is it a health problem?

Being overweight and obese in childhood is linked to illnesses such as heart attacks and strokes in adulthood. At least 1/3 of adults in the United States are overweight. In children as young as 3 years, fatty streaks in the blood vessels of the heart can be seen. Overweight preschoolers have higher levels of cholesterol than other children. All of these factors can lead to serious health problems. Obese children are also at risk for diabetes, bone and joint problems, and sleep apnea.

What can a parent do?

- Begin by offering your child a healthy diet that is low in fat and sugar. Have set meal times and eat together. This shows your child how an adult chooses healthy foods. Have healthy snacks like fruits and vegetables, not chips and soda pop.
- Encourage healthy activities like parking the car farther away from the store and doing more walking. Have music on and dance as you do the house work.
- Exercise as a family. Go on walks, ride bikes, and play sports. Have your child participate in group sports programs.

- If your doctor tells you that your child is at risk for obesity or is overweight, follow the recommendations. Be involved in your child's health.
- Regular physical education helps promote lifelong exercise skills and good mental health through improved self-esteem, self-confidence, and emotional development.

Other CARE CARDS and Educational Materials for Healthy Exercise and Diet:

- **"Maintaining Healthy Weight in Children"**
- **"Feeding Your Toddler 1 to 3 Years Old"**
- **"Feeding Your Preschooler 3 to 5 Years Old"**
- **"Eating Well During the Teen Years"**
- **"Starting Your Child on a Lifelong Fitness Adventure"**